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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 000361

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/FO, NEA/PPD, NEA/MAG, AND NEA/PI
NSC FOR SHAPIRO

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TAGS: PREL KISL KPAO KPAL TS

SUBJECT: TUNISIA: CONTINUED POSITIVE REACTIONS TO OBAMA
SPEECH ONE WEEK AFTER

REF: TUNIS 343

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) One week after President Obama's June 4 Cairo speech, Tunisians continue to be generally positive. Much skepticism remains, with some commentators raising questions about actions versus words. The speech also remains a topic of conversation and discourse in the media. In fact, the cover of the French-language weekly *Realites*, which came out on June 11, features a campaign photo of President Obama, with his logo in the background creating a halo effect around his head. The Embassy has already seen one concrete change as a result of the policies put in place by President Obama and articulated in the Cairo speech: some contacts who had boycotted Embassy events for the past several years put aside their anger over the war in Iraq to come to a roundtable about the Middle East Partnership Initiative. Meanwhile, several contacts in the economic and commercial domain have responded favorably to the speech, especially the references to economic development, entrepreneurship programs, and technology transfer, and are asking how they can sign up.
End Summary.

Official Responses: "Wonderful"

¶2. (C) Several GOT officials have responded favorably to the speech:

-- Saida Chtioui, Secretary of State for the Americas, Asia at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told the Ambassador on June 10 that the speech had been "wonderful." She assessed that it represented a complete change of US policy, which, she said, was "very welcome."

-- Salah T'barki, Head of the Chamber of Deputies' Foreign Relations Committee, was extremely positive, pulling the Ambassador aside on the margins of an EU elections event, to say that the speech represented just the kind of overture that was needed from the United States. T'barki said he believes GOT officials generally are pleased with President Obama's message.

-- Hajer Cherif, the Deputy Secretary General of the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party, also reacted very positively to the speech in a June 7 conversation with the Ambassador.

-- In a June 11 conversation with DCM and visiting NEA/MAG Office Director, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director for the

Americas Holla Bachtobji was very positive about the speech, expressing particular interest in the Israeli-Palestinian and economic development portions. With respect to the latter, she noted that the GOT had already submitted to the Congressional contacts and the Department a non-paper with ideas on how to use FY 2010 Economic Support Funds for a variety of initiatives that would be in line with Obama's ideas. Meanwhile, MFA official Mourad Belhassen characterized the speech as "excellent in tone," but he said he did not see anything new in substance. He said that this would be his written analysis in an internal paper he had been asked to prepare.

The Military Take

¶3. (C) Tunisian military officers with whom DATT has spoken have been generally pleased with the speech. The consensus is that, rather than say what he thought the Arab world wanted to hear, President Obama actually said what he meant and meant what he said. One exception was Captain-Major Khammassi, who said, "I like Bush. He saw a problem and he went directly at it. After a short pause he added, however, that "Obama understands Arabs better."

More than Just Words

¶4. (SBU) The cover story of this week's French-language weekly *Realites* features a campaign photo of President Obama,

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with his logo in the background creating a halo effect around his head. The accompanying headline is: "Obama, Islam, and Palestine: The New Face of America." This saintly portrayal reflects the positive vibe we have been getting from official and unofficial sources. The editorial, to which the cover refers, acknowledges that some commentators are asking whether Obama's words will remain, in the end just words. Indeed, the populist Arabic daily had warned earlier in the week against "fall(ing) into the trap of Obama's sweet words." The *Realites* editor concludes, however that there was more to the speech than just words. Rather, he says, Obama managed to use words -- including the Arabic and Quranic references -- to transcend historical and political differences. (Note: Embassy has transmitted to NEA/PPD a one-page synopsis of public sentiment and media reactions by separate email.)

MEPI Roundtable Participants: No More Boycott?

¶5. (SBU) At a June 10 roundtable with a diverse group of local contacts from political parties and non-governmental organizations, Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)/RO Director gave a briefing on MEPI activities. Pol/EconCouns took advantage of this gathering to underscore that the Embassy would be taking its lead from the policy direction given by the President in the Cairo speech. When asked if they had seen or read the speech, the participants reacted with laughter -- "As if any one of us would have missed this!" one said. All participants welcomed the message. Indeed, some participants, whose organizations had previously boycotted Embassy and particularly MEPI activities because of their rejection of the war in Iraq, made clear that they had come with an open mind to learn about MEPI activities and partnership possibilities as a result of the changes being put in place by President Obama and articulated in the speech. Some participants expressed skepticism about whether concrete actions would follow Obama's words, however, and some still harbored concerns about what they perceived as a US proclivity to try to "impose" democracy.

Tunisians Want In On Exchanges, Entrepreneurship Summit

¶ 6. (SBU) Several Embassy contacts from the economic and commercial realm have responded favorably to the speech as well:

-- Mondher Ben Ayed, President of the Tunisian-American Chamber of Commerce, told the Ambassador that he was in "100 percent agreement" with the speech.

-- Alaya Bettaieb, a venture capitalist who is a long-time Embassy contact and partner in several MEPI-funded Congressional Law Development Program (CLDP) activities, including on technology transfer, asked to see Pol/EconCouns and EconOff on June 10 as a direct result of the speech. He gushed that the speech, was "just right" and was particularly enthusiastic about the idea of the Summit on Entrepreneurship and the new fund to support technological development in Muslim majority countries. Bettaieb briefed us on the UAE-based Arab Science and Technology Foundation, of which he is a member, and whose Arab Academic Technology Transfer Project he directs. He is anxious to help partner with us in realizing President Obama's vision.

-- Aziz Mebarek, Founding Partner of Tuninvest, a successful, OPIC-backed venture capital enterprise with pan-African outreach, contacted Econ/CommercialOff the evening of the Cairo speech to praise its strong message. "This is the real face of the United States," he wrote, "which we love." He also appreciated the "courageous" way Obama dealt with sensitive topics such as the Middle East conflict. Picking up on Obama's references to economic development, Mebarek emphasized the work that Tuninvest is doing with Lagray, a pharmaceutical company in Accra, Ghana, which is focused on delivering WHO-identified essential drugs to the population. He suggested that President Obama visit this company during his planned July visit to Ghana. Finally, Mebarek concluded, he had no doubt that there would be a "before" and an "after" to the Cairo speech.

-- Khaled Koubaa, President and Founder of the Arab World Internet Institute and an alumni of the MEPI Leaders for Democracy Fellowship, contacted Pol/EconCouns to convey his pleasure with President Obama's speech. He noted that

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Obama's references to building bridges had rung true, and he suggested that the USG take advantage of the Internet as one such bridge. Koubaa also expressed interest in participating in the Summit on Entrepreneurship.

-- Koubaa was not the only contact to express interest in the Summit. As mentioned reftel, the Communications Manager of the Tunis branch of the International Association of Students of the Economic Sciences and Commerce (AISEC) also picked up on Obama's references to exchanges and the entrepreneurship summit, wasting no time in contacting Econ/CommercialOff to express interest.

Comment

¶ 7. (C) Clearly, the Cairo speech continues to resonate in Tunisia. Although the GOT did not make a public statement in response to the speech, the feedback that we have gotten from Tunisian officials has been quite positive. As for the response of our non-governmental contacts, the fact that some individuals who previously boycotted Embassy events came to our MEPI briefing speaks volumes. In addition, Ambassador is hosting a networking reception this evening for about 100 proven and potential change agents around the theme of social entrepreneurship. No doubt, the speech will continue to be a main topic of conversation. End Comment.

Please visit Embassy Tunis' Classified Website at:
[http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.c fm](http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm)
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